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ARTS THEATRE, 836 33rd, off
Litchfield Sq. Tom Stoppard's
"Dirty Linen" Mon.-Thurs.
8.30. Fri.-Sat. 7 and 9.15.
"The Happiest of Men" in the
West End.

July 24, 1941

Re-interpreting William Morris

The Flood, from an eighteenth-century Ethiopic hymnary: It is in the exhibition, *The Christian Orient*, which is at the British Library until September 24 (Catalogue, 80pp and 32 plates, British Museum Publications for the British Library, £2.50 exhibition only).

Commentary: Cine-tricks, Czech dissidents

The relief of solitude

By John Mole

JOHN MONTAGUE:
The Great Clock
63pp. Oxford University Press.
£2.75.

ANDREW MOTION:
The Pleasure Steamers
58pp. Manchester: Carcanet. £2.

A new book by John Montague is likely to be more than a gathering of occasional poems. Much of his recent work, though brief in its parts and often intensely lyrical, has amounted to a carefully woven fabric, threaded with the rough texture of his province's history and the gentle strands of personal recollection. In such memorable poems as "Like Holmes Rained My Childhood, The Old People" and "The County Fiddler" he has achieved a style in which apparent fragments of autobiography enlarge as they are read into a compendium of Gaelic culture: their scope is invariably wider than it seems, but portentousness is avoided because the larger resonances result from a genetic arrangement while the individual poems remain sharp-edged and particular. Even where Mr Montague attempts a more declamatory synthesis of ancient and modern in Ulster, as in "A New Siege", he allows the detail to scintillate, and avoids the easier path of rhetorical inflation.

This gift for organization is most apparent in his latest collection, *The Great Clock*, a personal sequence of love poems in three sections,

which opens with a concise statement of the "plot".

These poems should not only be read separately. A married man seeks comfort elsewhere, as his marriage breaks down. But he discovers that loneliness does not relieve his solitude. So the first section of the book ends with a slight affair which turns serious, the second with the despairing voices of a disintegrating marriage, the third with a new and growing relationship in which he pledges himself.

Such an explicit prose directive is perhaps necessary, in that books of love poetry tend to attract the passing dither and elusiveness who must be warned against his own casual tenderness, but it is hardly essential. Poetically, the great clock itself—Venus's mantle—becomes a simply effective unifying emblem, designed and decorated by the developing pattern of the collection. To begin with, the love-chase (clock of the hunter, who appears strikingly on the book's cover in a sixteenth-century woodcut), then the passion of mutual suffering and reconciliation (the clock of flame, the poisoned garment of betrayal), and in the final section of the triptych—where the title poem appears—the clock is wrapped around a new family, the dramatic persona of a personal redemption: it is "smooth and long to swathe a handsome woman's body". Or to encompass her lover as well.

Or when the baby is born, to wrap the mother tenderly. While home brews around them. Naturally as in Beethoven.

However, besides serving as a means of gathering many aspects of love towards a central metaphor, the clock is also a convenient device for absorbing a range of lyric styles, though in some roses barely justify.

ing them. The strongest poems show in their setting with a chilling, contemporary immediacy: As the thunderstorm hovers over the cor over me, a frantic claw, your mouth clumps upon mine

is a subtle, glowing capacity for sustaining mere time and defining permanence—an achieved Poesian Kingdom (the book is full of gentle boasts on the periphery of happiness, "cuddling in river mist", as well as turbulent correlations of betrayal which "move slowly, like coupling and killing"). Animals, neighbours, needing the pattern of one time and place into history, like our early marriage, while little windows looked down upon us from walls flushed light pink or salmon

watching and enduring succession. But the weakest poems, which are mainly very short, add up to little. They have nothing to offer but the trappings of traditional pretentiousness, a flat trembling like a balanced butterfly, "Love's pollen" lying lightly on skin, "The friendly moon" that ever looks over "twinned destinies", "Love's invisible ink, heart's watermark" etc.—or Gravenstein codenames which lack the master's touch and consequently sound rather mannered and derivative.

When the prayer is needed, the verse goes on extended. Naturally, we fall from grace. Mr Motion's skill in realizing the particular physical qualities of the ten landscapes ("fields must open to the winter's snow"), sustains and adds warmth to a bleak story: Tomorrow, high tides will press back into our hearts now, upon your dress.

Even some of the better pieces which rely on delicacy of effect to make their impact are marred by a peculiar blend of evanescence and awkward crudity:

And they tell apart
The merciless creak
Of jealous's film
To a wot cum
like flowers after rain.
It is not only jealousy's film which
creaks mercilessly there, but the
very conception of such a por-
trayal.

These, though, are poems which,

in the end, can be banished to the cloak's recesses. Fortunately they serve merely as the soft spots between several excellent, moving pieces of which "Talisman", "The Dark", "Lament", "Herbert Street Revisited" and "The Point" are outstanding and alone worth having the collection for.

The speaker of the historical sequence "Inland", which makes up the central section of Andrew Motion's first collection—*The Pleasure Steamers*—and which which won the Newdigate Prize in 1975, traces the events whereby he and the other members of a displaced seventeenth-century fenland village become "strangers in our own land". In the new village to which they have been moved by commercial pressures beyond their control, the speaker discovers the deep hill/water dissonance, and when the speaker revisits his old house, a mood of desolation is evoked with telling precision:

Remember the haunts that conjoined
our room
with shade?
Now through its windows their
leaves splo

in an airless cascade,
and when I look in, I see no trace
of the trues we reached;
only in darkness abandoned chairs
to a posture of speech.

Finally, the sense of exile is complete: "we are without past now, waiting for lights to come on in foreign towns." Most survive, some like the village preacher, Jesse Seavey, who under, only love, treated in the sequence with a brief but sensitive tenderness which matches Mr Motion's skill in realizing the particular physical qualities of the ten landscapes ("fields must open to the winter's snow"), sustains and adds warmth to a bleak story: Tomorrow, high tides will press back into our hearts now, upon your dress.

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seems to be a stranger to him, and poem after poem he becomes the ghost of his detachment, set against the world from which Mr Motion has so recently and so painfully emerged.

My hand on this bridge, this morning, and here in a crowd of ones the match I dropped. Everything waits for me to find for enough forward in the change.

Highlighting this awareness, being cast out of himself into an equally acute sense of collective human loneliness. A scene, image throughout *The Pleasure Steamers* is that of distant love, of late travellers, "now down in the river like me in flasks in the Thames".

The pleasure steamers which by one . . . go out to the water, each of these examples come from a different poem and they with the recurrence of work in their cumulative effect is as an insistent sense of alienation as the details of urban life. Even among lovers, friends, and workers, significant estrangement and trust are occasional excursions in the fact, when regularly allowed, is often dull, resulting in much from a lack of imagination as from any unsuspected onslaught of reality.

There is no question but that fresh and unexpected truth, while often frightening, is just as often seriously exhilarating. This is because whatever else it is, it is frequently a relief from some established fabrication. It can be wonderful to force yourself or another to give up a worn myth. So I speak well of the truth. But I cannot accompany the author so far as to say, as she does in this book, that no one should lie except on the rarest occasions. And she thinks that is the main thing to say about the whole subject.

She comes to this by way of definition, as well as by her chosen method of moral concentration. She defines it as an intentional statement, as follows:

When we undertake to deceive others intentionally, we compromise ourselves. We mean to mislead, to make them believe what we ourselves do not believe. We can do so through gesture, through disguise, by means of action or inaction, even through silence. Which of these methods is the most effective? I do not know. I shall define as a lie any intentional deceptive message which is stated. Such statements are most often made verbally or in writing. . . . Deception, then, is the latter category, and lying forms part of it.

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By concentrating on the intentional statement as the, she unavoidably ensures that lesser forms of deception will be more frequently accompanied by a greater sense of virtue.

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SISSELA BOK:

Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life
Moral Choice in Public and Private Life
326pp. New York: Penthon Books.
\$10.95.

I find two subjects in this book, although the author would probably say that one of them was in fact a method. In her view, the subject is lying and ethical analysis is the method. For me, the latter is a problem.

We live in a made-up world. It is a scientific construction based on fact and truth—although some of its worst artefacts result from ambitious efforts in that direction. The amount of distortion in it—careless, loopy, intended, and otherwise—is so overwhelming us to characterize humanity itself. Even among lovers, friends, and workers, significant estrangement and trust are occasional excursions in the fact, when regularly allowed, is often dull, resulting in much from a lack of imagination as from any unsuspected onslaught of reality.

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best hard moral choices. The more the intervening steps are multiplied, the more room is left for bias, self-deception, even slight of hand. The methods advocated within many moral systems . . . are often so rudimentary that any answer can emerge, depending on what values are introduced at the beginning.

What paths, what means of inquiry into the troubling questions of truth-telling and lying remain if systems help so little? I believe that any method, to be of help, should originate with the actual choices people make. It should have to look at the actual choices they give, to themselves and to others, the arguments by which they appeal to principles, and the reasons by which they evaluate such arguments who others make them. To take such a path will require a search for cases, examples, descriptions, of what

The paths of deception

By David Bazelon

obliquely as possible. We may even get sick at the stomach trying to utter the truth. This context cannot be finessed in discussing the subject of lying. Not safely. Not by neglecting the deadliest sources and forms of deception—silence, fantasy, stupidity, weariness—especially the first, where there is so little chance to see through (significant phrase!) the distortion.

So the book has a narrow focus. Within its limited purview, it is useful. The exposition is clear, with orderly progression; the author's moral sincerity is patent; one has confidence in her philosophical training as she reviews the classical background—St Augustine, Kant, Bentham, etc. Moreover, as she finally poses the problem of her inquiry, after reviewing the absolutist and utilitarian systems, she is impressive:

Uncertainty and imprisison

Such lies may well be uttered in good faith in an effort to avoid harmful speculation and hoarding. Nevertheless, if false statements are made to the public only to be exposed as soon as the devaluation or the new one is announced, great damage to trust will result. . . . In addition, these lies are subject to all the dangers of spread and mistake and deterioration of standards the economy of deception.

For those reasons, it is far better to refuse comment than to lie in such situations. (See my observation above about encouraging lesser forms of deception.) Later, permitting an individual to lie under torture, she reasons: "It is unlikely that the practice of lying will spread because of the victim's lie under duress."

Sissela Bok is an intelligent, accomplished woman. She is a professor of ethics at the Harvard Medical School, and has written about sticky issues like placebo, suicide, lying to patients, etc. Her background credentials are superior: she is the wife of Derek Bok, the President of Harvard University, and the daughter of Gunnar Myrdal. Moreover, close involvement with the ethics of the medical profession—the only one with codes, including the Hippocratic Oath, none of which even mention veracity as a principle—could turn a worse sinner than I into a moralist.

But for the sake of our sanity and essential shyness, we must resist many moral impulses along the way, especially those leading immediately to richly fulfilled fantasies which we must resist. We can do so through gesture, through disguise, by means of action or inaction, even through silence. Which of these methods is the most effective? I do not know. I shall define as a lie any intentional deceptive message which is stated. Such statements are most often made verbally or in writing. . . . Deception, then, is the latter category, and lying forms part of it.

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happens. It will lead into working lives, family relationships, political practices.

And she does go over numerous cases and examples of lying—from white lies to Watergate, with emphasis on established professional deception, especially in medicine—but almost always with the same set of reflections and the same conclusions. Where she is most helpful, characteristically, is in bringing forth the complications of understanding falsehood, the amount of foresight required, general misconceptions about the case of lying, the costs of conventional fabrication, and so on—all important preliminary considerations. Again and again she prevails how difficult lying is, and then assumes she has sufficiently advanced the discussion—which places this reader just past the throat-clearing stage. Again and again, for exam-

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tion, and we all lived in the same part of town. It isn't: we don't.

Worse, as an ill-advised moral initiative, the slippery-slope cliché, displace interest and energy from the issue at hand—namely, this lie. Like the decentered particularities of the crime and the criminals for the grandeur of example alone. But let me illustrate. She discusses lying by a government about the prospective devaluation of its currency.

Such lies may well be uttered in good faith in an effort to avoid harmful speculation and hoarding. Nevertheless, if false statements are made to the public only to be exposed as soon as the devaluation or the new one is announced, great damage to trust will result. . . . In addition, these lies are subject to all the dangers of spread and mistake and deterioration of standards the economy of deception.

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ple, she tells us that we shouldn't lie because we might mislead. But that is a question of difficulty, not propriety. Again and again, however, she allows the point to end up in her moral column. Just as well the devil might urge one against truth-telling, because after all one might be wrong. And then again and again, Professor Bok reveals the double-woman we set a bad precedent by lying, for ourselves and others: it becomes a destructive habit; it will spread throughout the land, under the name of "truth" and other necessary things. This is the slippery-slope argument, a standard in legal reasoning, commonly referred to with the folk rubric, give 'em an inch and they'll take a mile. What is first of all wrong with it, here, is the presumption that we are talking about a personal evil that can be dealt with socially, by careful personal example. It might work if lying were a recent inven-

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